Doris Dohrenwend

an exhibition

Chinese Jades

in the Royal Ontario Museum

Eastern Chou *Crouching Feline*, Pendant.

Jade in China

The Chinese have prized jade over all substances including gold from Late Neolithic times, when the jade axes of village chieftains were the crown jewels of China, to at least Ch'ing times when the last Manchu Emperors heaved the great jade seals of state. In Chinese literature jade is a frequent metaphor for excellence. Its qualities were likened to those of the Confucian ideal of the chun-tzŭ, noble or superior man.

The primordial forms of the ritual jades symbolized and buttressed first feudal authority and later relations within Empire and Cosmos. Finally, the beauty of nephrite to eye, hand and ear, and its incorruptibility and indestructibility in the pure state, made it a delight and almost a religion. Underlying the esteem in which jade was held for so long is also the fact that it was rare or nonexistent in China itself. From the beginning it seems to have been an imported luxury, the treasure of the few, status symbol as well as ornament.

The Stone

In the traditional or general sense jade, like the Chinese *yü*, can refer to any hardstone of beauty, particularly greenstones. In the modern or mineralogical sense it means either nephrite, *chên yü*, or jadeite, which the Chinese called *fei-ts'ui*. Jade cannot be certified by eye or touch only, even by a mineralogist, although non-scratchability with a steel blade is a good sign of appropriate hardness.

Unearthed from Late Neolithic burials in China, nephrite was the earliest and most loved of the two forms of jade. Its soft, subtle and infinitely varied range of colours and states include grey, near-black, russet, tan and the "chicken-bone white" of burned or calcified nephrite, as well as the translucent greens. Nephrite is a calcium-magnesium silicate, a rock-forming mineral of the amphibole group. It is hard (6½ on Moh's scale, which ranges from softest talc through steel to hardest diamond), tough (its tiny crystals are compressed in a dense and felted mass of fibres), and rare (it was probably imported from the jade-bearing rivers and mountains of the Khotan region in distant Central Asia).

Jadeite came relatively late to China from the Tawmaw region of Upper Burma; it is believed not to have been worked by the Chinese before the 18th century. It characteristically shows more lavender whites and more brilliant (chromium) greens. Jadeite is a sodium-aluminium silicate slightly harder than nephrite but not quite as tough, having a more broadly crystalline structure.

The "spinach" jade associated with the region of Lake Baikal in Soviet Siberia often has black speck inclusions of graphite or chromite and may not have been worked in China before the 19th century. There is nephrite in British Columbia and in Wyoming, while diopside jadeite was worked in Central America. Neither nephrite nor jadeite have been discovered in China, although jade-like local hardstones were carved there from early times. Many archaic jades are opaque white from calcification due to soil conditions in burial, on the one hand, or burning at high heat on the other. The effect was appreciated and simulated in late archaistic pieces.

The Craft

The "carving" of jade means the wearing-away of the jade-stone by other stones in the form of abrasives, whatever the tool. The earliest tools may have been sandstone or slate saws, bamboo and bone drills and points. Early abrasives, such as local quartz sands, were probably carried in a grease medium until the invention of the treadle-lathe, when water might be used. Early openwork was perhaps done by abrasives embedded in string or gut, later by wire-sawing. Bronze tools were used from Late Shang (when for the first

time we find neater cylindrical, instead of rougher conical or biconical, perforations in disks and pendants). After about 500 B.C. a "great leap" in the craft may have been made with iron tools and improved abrasives, such as crushed garnets, and perhaps even an early diamond point. Circular saws do not seem to have been used before the Six Dynasties period. Many large ritual jades with the "scars" of circular sawing are late archaistic pieces, the shadowy arcs on their surfaces belying their antique appearance.

Carborundum, the most effective abrasive of all, is artificial, and was imported and used in China only in the present century. Carborundum is the main ingredient of *pao-yao*, the final polishing powder of today. Wood and leather were doubtless used from the beginning for polishing and buffing. Inscriptions on jades especially of the 18th century Ch'ien-lung reign were almost surely cut with diamond points. Modern jade carvings may be done by traditional methods, but are likely to reveal the too smooth work of dental type drills and other electrical equipment.

Some knowledge of the progress of the craft with its tell-tale signs—or lack of signs—is essential to dating plain or very early jades. A time chart or Chronology is included at the end of this pamphlet. The letter (or letters in borderline or uncertain cases) below each piece of jade corresponds with that allotted its period on the chart.

Types of Jade

Weapons and Tools

Jade axes or axe-heads are known from Late Neolithic burials in China. They continued to be made through the Bronze Age as ceremonial, then ritual, forms. The latest ones were mainly ornamental. These axes are archetypal jades—deifications for the few in precious material of a humble but important tool. There are also adzes or chisels and the (sometimes strikingly large) trapezoidal knives characteristic of China and the "Pacific Culture Area." Weapons of war, such as the *ko* dagger-axe and spear- and arrow-heads, belong to the Bronze Age and "civilization," as do many smaller and finer implements and amulets or potent miniatures. The fascination in Chinese Bronze Age weapons made of jade is their combination of barbaric conception with utmost refinement. Sword and scabbard fittings of jade come mainly from Eastern Chou and Han times and probably indicate the ceremonial trappings of an elite rather than effective weapons of war.

Archaic Jades

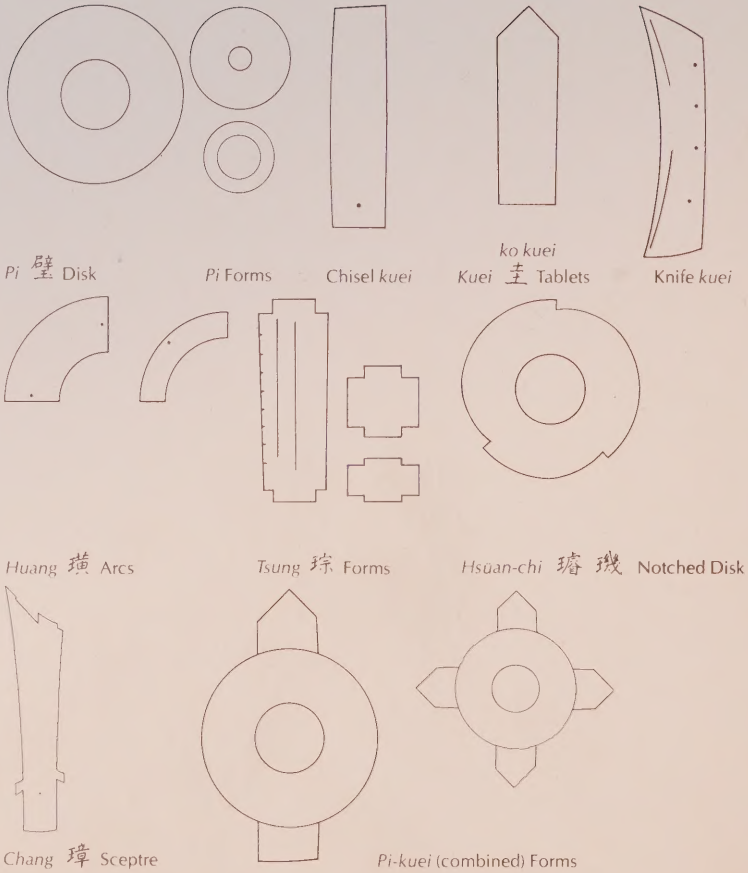
This richly varied group from the Shang, Chou and Han Dynasties (c. 1523 B.C.-220 A.D.) includes all pendants, plaques, beads and toggle-sculptures (many evidencing a desire to use every bit of the precious mineral) which do not fit clearly into the other categories of antique jades. Most are small and flat. Many are decorated identically on both sides. Some were hung from the belt as amulets. Plain-backed ones would have been sewn to clothing, fastened to strapwork or inset in wood. Some were made for the foreheads of horses. Others were strung as chimes for chariots as well as for men and beasts. The earlier ones are usually in animal forms—imaginary animal themes such as the *t'ao-t'ieh* frontal monster mask and the *kuei-lung* profile dragon, and real animals like the tortoise, hare, fish, birds of various kinds, deer and tiger. The creatures of the mind were usually done in a more abstract or "geometric" style; the others sometimes show the heightened, if simplified, realism of Eskimo sculpture. Man, between such forces of Heaven and Earth, hardly makes his appearance in jade as a wholly human being before Han. It is interesting to see the stylistic evolution of the dragon in jade (as in bronze) from the static abstractions of Shang through the more sinuous ornamentalism of Eastern Chou to the striking "modernity" of Han.

Ritual Jades

According to Chapter XVIII of the *Chou Li* (*"Rites of Chou"*), "He [the Master of Religious Ceremonies] pays homage to Heaven with the green *pi*. With the yellow *tsung* he does homage to Earth. With the green *kuei* he pays homage to the East. With the red *chang* he renders homage to the region of the South. With the white tiger *hu* he renders homage to the West. With the black *huang* he does homage to the North." This influential passage from a classical work of about the 4th century B.C. reflects Late Chou and Han thinking about the long-lived forms of China's ritual jades. It is now clear that these forms derived originally from jade weapons and tools. Variants were made from parts, combinations, elaborations and refinements of a few basic types. The relation of names in the literature to forms in collections, and of forms with functions in different periods, is still a matter for endless speculation. There is no doubt, however, that the ritual jades are among the most powerful symbols of social, political and religious order in Chinese civilization.

Personal Ornaments

Slotted-disk earrings, disk-segment necklaces and cylindrical and discoidal



bracelets were among the earliest forms of personal adornment in China. Plain and decorated beads are legion. From roughly the 6th century B.C. in China jades of various kinds and colours—arcs, rings, disks, plaques and beads—were assembled in elaborate, chiming *yü-p'ei* girdle pendants, which were hung from the belt for reasons of beauty, sound and perhaps also of health. First they were strung on cords and ribbons; later the pieces were sometimes linked by chains. One Eastern Chou set has been approximated from period pieces in the ROM's collection. The Sui-T'ang plaques with bronze nailheads and loops may have figured in a later one of these sets. The girdle pendants can be seen on T'ang pottery burial figurines and in later figure painting. Jade belthooks (which follow bronze forms and may never have been worn) also date from the Late Eastern Chou and Han periods, later ones being versions of these. Headdress ornaments of jade include Shang to Ch'ing hairpins, hatbars and comb-tops.

Burial Jades

If the jade worn about the body and even ground up and taken internally failed to effect actual Immortality, the precious material was buried with the dead to ensure preservation as well as luxury. The Neolithic jade axes may have been made primarily for burial. Quantities of jade were buried with the Bronze Age dead. It is not until Eastern Chou, however, that jade and jade-substitute plaques were buried in assemblages suggesting masks, probably originally set into wood or sewn to a cloth covering. By Han times all that was left of the death-mask were almond-shaped eye-plaques. A stylized cicada jade symbol of resurrection was placed on the tongue, and there would be plugs of differing sizes for "the nine apertures" of the body. Very modern-looking jade pigs were often included, and there might be a jade seal and belthook. A rich Han tomb in Hopei excavated recently contained over five thousand rectangular jade plaques from a burial suit or shroud.
The paucity of buried jade in such sets, or even individual pieces, in post-Han tombs may point to grave-robbing. It doubtless also reflects a change in attitude toward the dead, a swing in favour of the living, in the unwillingness to consign so much treasure to the tomb. This gap has left us with a "dark millennium" as far as archaeological evidence for the dating of 3rd to 18th century jades is concerned.

Late Shang *T'ao-t-'ieh* or frontal monster mask, a major motif in Chinese art of the early Bronze Age.

Sculpture

Jade sculpture of primordial simplicity may have been fashioned before the use of metal tools. The Late Shang period at Anyang, however, saw a burst of animal art in jade as well as bronze. Some Shang jades, such as a small, white, triangular bird in flight, although used as pendants or beads, have remarkable sculptural quality of the kind for which Eskimo art is famous. Sculpture in the round as an independent branch of the jade carver's art belongs, in the main, to Han and later times. A famous early example from the collection is the marbled blackish water-buffalo first taken as Shang but probably of Han date, with its rounded and generalized form and its natural, slouch-sitting posture. The water-buffalo, symbolizing bucolic peace and prosperity, became a major theme in Chinese painting as well as jade. A small "mutton-fat" jade bird with a flowering branch in its beak shows the compactness and clarity of form in the golden years of the great T'ang Dynasty when Buddhist sculpture was at its classical height in China. By Southern Sung times a more relaxed naturalism was achieved in animal sculpture, illustrated here by the pebble sculpture of Sika deer with the Fungus of Immortality. The subtle ornamentalism and sophisticated stylization of a superb green and brown hound with head turned backward probably represents a Ming style based on the realism achieved by the Sung carvers. The sculptures of the 18th and 19th centuries often have a crowning touch of humour about them, as well as an extremely clever use of areas of colour in, or in the "skin" of, the stone toward representational effects.

Vessels

There are marble and fluorite vessels from the Shang Dynasty in the ROM collection. The earliest and perhaps the most beautiful jade vessels, however, are the cups and caskets from the Chin-ts'un tombs of Old Loyang (5th-3rd century B.C.). The beautiful Sung-to-Ming cup in the last case refers in a fine, early, archaistic style to these earliest jade vessels. From the Ch'ing Dynasty, with its access to larger pieces of purer stone, come most of the jade vessels we know from China. These are of nephrite, like the small dark green *hu* vase with ring handles, and also of jadeite, the material of the small white covered *hu* with tinges of brilliant green. There are five general types of jade vessels: (1) frank and ornate archaistic ones like the great "spinach" vase; (2) shapes based on natural forms like the superb long lotus leaf dish; (3) "Indian style" vessels with ornately carved surface ornament like that of the white bowl; (4) absolutely plain, fine, thin bowls in ceramic shapes with the material alone

Ming grey nephrite "*Fu*," auspicious Chinese lion originally associated with Buddhism.

again supreme as it was in Neolithic times; and (5) pieces of mixed decorative, natural and archaistic character like the whitish vase with animals on stylized rock base. All jade vessels, of course, are a form of sculpture.

Problems in Chinese Jade

Is it Chinese?

The Chinese have long loved and worked on jade, so that jade is associated primarily with China. The sole rivals, the Moghul jades of 17th and 18th century India, may have exceedingly fine, thin and plain lobed forms quite different from Chinese forms. Often the surface is intricately carved with floral and other patterns inset with gold wire and precious stones in a taste which caught on in 18th century China but was not the native taste. Some scholars suggest that Indian jades were made by Chinese craftsmen to foreign order. The exterior of a small white bowl in the exhibit shows Chinese "Indian style." A running stag (of much earlier date) may, on the other hand, be a product of a Chinese borderland industry rather than a central Chinese one. A Neolithic axe, undecorated, unexcavated, and not reliably reported to be from China might be from Europe, Central Asia or America. American jades were often mistakenly included in Chinese collections, while the reverse was also true. Not all jades are Chinese.

Is it jade?

The traditional craftsman did and will know jade by its hardness and toughness in the working. Laymen, collectors, and even mineralogists may at first take other greenstones, particularly the serpentines, for nephrite. The only sure test for jade is X-ray Diffraction Analysis of the pattern made from a small sampling of the purer part of a stone using mineralogical laboratory equipment. About twenty ROM jades were tested in the Museum's Department of Mineralogy. All have historical value but not all were jade.

What is its date?

Most Chinese jades can be grouped and roughly dated by form and ornament and the relation between the two, or by their style. Scientifically excavated jades from undisturbed and dated tombs are of value in anchoring comparable pieces in time. Archaeology, however, is of less help in the dating of jades than of pottery and other less enduring, precious and portable items. A jade may have been passed on for generations in time, carried widely in space, and buried later and elsewhere than it was made. The recarving of ancient disks and decorated plaques can, on the other hand, provide conclusive evidence of the sequence of two designs. This is true in the case of a pair of bowknot-shaped plaques in the exhibit. The cut-into dragon design on their backs is datable to later Western Chou. The design of the front, which one might have thought Shang, must be later.

Archaism and Forgery

The fashioning of late works in early forms and styles is a problem throughout all branches of Chinese art, especially jade. The line between an archaistic piece and a forgery is a fine one. Sometimes it consists solely of the intention of the maker to deceive or not to deceive for profit. A small, cylindrical, tripod cup with climbing-dragon "handle" in the exhibition is probably a 13th to 15th century archaistic version of a Late Chou-to-Han form. The small jade dancer is almost surely a later archaism or a modern fake. All late ritual jades are inherently archaistic, some with designs frankly revealing their lateness, others designed to look genuinely early. Here the track of the craft, its methods and tools, can tell much.

A General Chronology

Key to Dating	Chinese Dynasties and Periods	Time Line	Elsewhere	
A	?c. 3000 – 1550 B.C. **Late Neolithic** Painted Pottery and Black Pottery horizons.		2575 B.C. Cheops' Pyramid	
B	? 1523 – 1028 B.C. **Shang (– Yin)** Earliest known historic dynasty of Bronze Age China. – Oracle bones, human sacrifice, priest-kings and the most striking bronze art the world has seen.		1000 – 961 B.C. King David in Jerusalem	
C	? 1027 – 771 B.C. (Western) **Chou** Development of feudal institutions and lasting patterns of culture.			
D	770 – 256 B.C. (Eastern) **Chou** Rise of the "Hundred Schools" of Philosophy. Confucius and Lao-tzŭ. Warfare and jade. Iron.		?563 – 483 B.C. The Buddha 469 – 399 B.C. Socrates	547 – 331 B.C. Achaemenid Empire of Persia
E	221 – 207 B.C. **Ch'in** Early concept and building of Empire.			
F	206 B.C. – A.D. 220 **Han** (Western and Eastern) First great Chinese Empire. Consolidation of the Great Wall. Traffic over the Silk Road. Invention of paper.	B.C. A.D.	44 B.C. Death of Caesar Birth of Christ	
G	220 – 589 **Six Dynasties** Period of political disunity, Confucian breakdown and the spread of Buddhism in China.		476 Fall of Rome	
H	589 – 618 **Sui** Brief period of reunification and building.			
I	618 – 906 **T'ang** China's Golden Age – strong, receptive and expansive.		622 Mohammed and the founding of Islam	800 Holy Roman Empire founded by Charlemagne
J	906 – 960 **Five Dynasties** Period of disunity following T'ang collapse.			
K	960 – 1279 **Sung** (Northern and Southern) Cities. Celadon. Tea. Landscape painting. Incursions from the North.		1066 Norman Conquest of England 1096 First Crusade 1194 – 1221 Chartres Cathedral 1321 Death of Dante	
L	1280 – 1368 **Yüan** (Mongol) Foreign (Khan) rule witnessed by Marco Polo. Early blue-and-white.			
M	1368 – 1644 **Ming** Re-affirmation of native tradition. Expansion, then gradual inward-turning of the country *vis-à-vis* the outside world.		1492 Columbus reaches the New World 1508 – 1512 Sistine Chapel ceiling painted by Michelangelo	1517 – The Reformation 1519 – 1521 Magellan around the world.
N	1644 – 1911 **Ch'ing** (Manchu) Last great period of Empire under foreign rule. Assault and challenge of the West.		The Industrial Revolution	
O	**1912 –** **Modern** Successive revolutionary struggles to build the modern nation-state on the basis of the world's oldest continuous tradition.			

The letter (or letters in borderline or uncertain cases) below each piece of jade corresponds with that allotted its period on this chart.